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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 000437

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR SA/INS, LONDON FOR POL/GURNEY, NSC FOR MILLARD

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PTER PGOV CASC EAID NP

SUBJECT: NEPAL: MAOIST BLOCKADE UNEVENLY IMPLEMENTED, MOST HEAVILY FELT IN THE TERAI

¶11. (SBU) Summary. On March 8, Maoist-affiliated organizations initiated a 15-day road blockade in western and mid-western Nepal. The Maoists had declared the closure in 13 Districts, although implementation appears to be haphazard and has extended to districts outside the declared zone. On March 9, the main north-south highway linking Kathmandu with the southern lowlands (Terai) was blocked with felled trees and electric-wire poles, effectively stopping long-haul commercial and passenger vehicles from reaching their destinations. The southern east-west highway connecting Chitwan with eastern Nepal was also closed for much of the day. On March 10, police contacts indicated that the main highways were clear and traffic was moving. Reasons behind the blockade remain unclear, although media reports suggest that the blockade is an attempt by the Maoists to disrupt the King's civic reception in Pokhara scheduled for March 28. Police contacts believe, however, that the closures are meant to conceal a mass movement of insurgents in the western region. Whatever the reason, the blockade will deter many Nepalis and foreign tourists from traveling by road over the next two weeks. End Summary.

¶12. (SBU) On March 4, three Maoist-affiliated organizations announced a 15-day road blockade from March 8-23 in 13 Districts of western and mid-western Nepal. (Note. In late 2003, these three ethnic-based organizations -- the Taruwan National Liberation Front, the Magarat National Liberation Front, and the Madhesi National Liberation Front -- declared themselves to be regional autonomous zones covering nearly 20 of Nepal's 75 Districts. The organizations were created to appeal to the Gurung, Magar and Terai-based ethnic groups, respectively, that might feel disadvantaged and excluded from government participation and social services. End Note.) The 13 affected Districts are: Chitwan, Nawalparasi, Rupandehi, Palpa, Syanja, Kaski, Tanahu, Parwat, Lamjung, Gorkha, Gulmi, Myagdi and Manang.

¶13. (SBU) Contacts in Bharatpur, headquarters of Chitwan District, reported on March 9 that the main north-south artery between the central Terai and Kathmandu was completely closed. All vehicles were forced to stop in Narayanghat, just a few kilometers north of Bharatpur, where large trees have been felled onto the road in numerous locations. Press reports confirmed that the Maoists successfully shut down commerce along the north-south highway, including the second largest produce market in Nepal. However, the Chief District Officers of four of the affected districts (Gorkha, Kaski, Rupandehi, and Palpa) said that life was normal, shops were open and vehicles were plying the roads. The main east-west highway reportedly was cleared by security forces early in the day on March 9. On March 10, police contacts indicated that all main highways were clear and traffic was moving as normal. However, police officials were concerned that the length of the blockade inevitably would result in some closures in the next two weeks since the affected area is too large for effective coverage by security personnel.

¶14. (SBU) The road blockade appears to have been implemented haphazardly and has extended to districts outside the Maoist-declared area. An American citizen reported on March 10 that the north-south highway linking Kathmandu with the Tibetan border had been blocked by rocks and other debris. That same day, World Food Program staff confirmed that Maoists had closed roads in Salyan, Rolpa and Pyuthan Districts in mid-western Nepal. The impact of the blockade will be felt most by Nepal's agriculture and tourist industries that rely daily on an open transportation system. Many agricultural cooperatives already have deplored the Maoist blockade and requested that it be lifted immediately.

¶15. (SBU) Comment. The reasons behind the 15-day blockade remain unclear. Media reports suggest that the Maoists seek to disrupt King Gyanendra's civic reception in Pokhara, scheduled for March 28. The King's recent travels to fifteen districts, including those considered to be the Maoist heartland, and his enthusiastic reception by crowds of common people were an embarrassment to the Maoists. Police contacts believe, however, that the Maoists are using the closures to conceal a major movement of insurgents in the western region. Whatever the reason, the blockade will intimidate many Nepalis and foreign tourists from traveling by road over the

next two weeks. Certainly, uncertainties over where and when the blockade will be implemented increase personal anxieties throughout the country. The Embassy has alerted American citizens in Nepal of the road closures and suggested they defer unnecessary road travel until after March 25. Post will continue to track the blockade and report on any significant events. End Comment.

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